

ACT or CATS?

Tests put to the test



While waiting Saturday to take the ACT at Kentucky State University, Ben Mefford, 12, right, got advice on dividing algebraic expressions from Justin Thompson, 13. Both are students from Frankfort Christian Academy, taking the test as part of the Duke University Talent Identification Program. Legislation before the General Assembly could require all high school juniors to take the ACT.

State Journal/Suzanne Feliciano

College entrance exam could replace parts of state assessment test under legislation before session

By **MOLLY WILLIAMSON**
State Journal Staff Writer

Turn off your cell phones. Check the signs for your room assignments. Line up outside your door. Have your IDs and tickets ready.

And that is all before the four hours of testing begins.

Students from across Franklin County gathered early Saturday in Kentucky State University's Hathaway Hall to take the ACT college entrance examination.

Armed with their No. 2 pencils and calculators, most students said they felt

ready for the test, mainly because they had prepared ahead of time.

Franklin County High School junior Zac Lumbard said he visited the ACT Web site, took some practice tests there and then sent away for a practice book, which he studied for two hours each night for a few weeks.

"I just studied a lot," said Zac Lumbard, Franklin County High School junior. I studied math, history and biology ... because I suck at biology. My report card will tell you that."

Waiting outside his testing room, Lumbard said he was nervous about

taking the test because his score will determine where he can go to college. However, he was more anxious about waiting on one of his parents to bring him his ID.

"I just hope I can get it before the test starts," Lumbard said.

Soon, all Kentucky high school juniors could be enduring the same routine if one of two bills before the General Assembly passes. The House and Senate each has a version, which would replace part of the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System with the ACT.

Senate Bill 130 sponsor Sen. Dan Kelly, R-Springfield, said the ACT would replace some areas of the CATS assessments, but the state could still keep the open response and writing sample portions as well as other components such as arts and humanities, practical living and vocational studies that the ACT does not have.

However, Kelly said many of the ACT-like standardized tests now are sophisticated enough to incorporate all aspects that CATS assesses.

"It remains to be seen how much
See **TESTS**, A9

Tests (Continued from Page A1)

(the ACT) will replace," Kelly said. "I am not an advocate of the ACT, I am an advocate of improving how we use assessments as diagnostic tools to tell us how our students are achieving. There has been a deficiency in CATS and we need to solve that deficiency ... so that more students will go to college and more students will be ready for it."

However, the Kentucky Board of Education has been working on updating the CATS assessments and went out to bid in August to have a new CATS test made, said Lisa Gross, Kentucky Department of Education spokeswoman. CATS costs the state about \$10 million to \$12 million each year.

The estimated cost for administering the ACT to all juniors would be \$1.5 million.

According to amended Senate Bill 130, all juniors would have to take the ACT, but if the students wanted to report the scores to a college, then they would assume the cost of the test - roughly \$29 for the basic test and another \$14 for the writing portion.

If students did not want to send on their scores, the state would pay for the test, but the students would take the free WorkKeys test, which is a work readiness test that assesses students' reading for information, business writing and applied mathematics levels.

Students could still take the test multiple times to try to get a better score, but they would have to individually pay for each consecutive testing, Kelly said.

Also, if students scored poorly in math, English or reading, the students would participate in remedial training and then the school district would pay for those students to take the test again.

Sen. Julian Carroll, D-Frankfort, said the Senate is not ready to pass the bill quite yet. He said it still needs discussion to see if it will require any more amendments.

He said he is not sure if the intent of the bill was to replace the CATS, but said, "there is nothing wrong with juniors being tested to determine if they need to do some catch-up their senior year. We certainly want everyone to graduate and get a high school diploma."

He said the bill has "some merit" but wants to make sure it is not designed to replace CATS down the road, just supplement it, and not diminish the Kentucky Education Reform Act requirements.

The concept is not new. Illinois and Colorado have administered the test to all juniors since 2001 and Michigan recently passed law requiring all junior to take the ACT, said Ed Colby, ACT spokesman. He said Illinois and Colorado do not require the writing test, but Michigan will.

Those states have seen an increase in the number of students who go to college, namely minorities and special education students.

"There are a number of advan-

tages (to having all juniors take the ACT)," Colby said. "It gets students thinking about college, particularly students who would not have thought of taking an ACT type test or going to college."

"In terms of statewide tests, students have a stake in the outcome of the ACT," Colby said. "It can be important to a student, because if they do well, they can apply to college and be accepted. So it is to their advantage to try to do their best on the test. Whereas, some standardized tests administered do not have any extra meaning, so some students do not do their best."

Franklin County High School sophomore Katherine Welch said she thinks most students take the ACT so they have prospects for college, but said if students do not want to go on to college, "there is no point in them taking it."

"They just need to put more curriculum in the CATS test, because a lot of teachers, even though they try not to, cater to the CATS test," Welch said. "But if we had the ACT instead, they would probably just cater to the ACT."

Franklin County High School sophomores Landon Mefford and Chris Hogan said already students do not take the CATS test seriously.

"Everyone just runs through it to get it over with," Hogan said. "It is not like we need to pass it to graduate."

"I don't really like the CATS test," Mefford said. "No one takes it seriously. If we had to take the ACT, since we need it to get into college, everyone would take it seriously."

Many students said moving to the ACT instead of the CATS would be more useful.

Franklin County sophomores Skyler Atha and Maranda Charles said they think requiring the ACT is a good idea. They said they think the ACT would be more useful than CATS because CATS "is just for the school, it doesn't count for us," Charles said.

"It shows you how you rate for college and how good your study habits are," Charles said. "It just sums everything up. Everyone should take it. Even if they don't plan on going to college, they make take the test, score well and it could change their mind."

"You need the ACT to get into college and it helps show you where you are at, shows you what you know," Atha said.

Plus, Charles said the results are hard to read and interpret, while the ACT is easily understandable. It shows how the students rank in each content area.

Atha said she feels the CATS assessments are a "waste of time" because she is missing class time to take a test about concepts she has not learned yet.

"Half the time I don't even know what they are talking about," Atha said. "It just feels like it doesn't count for anything."

Franklin County senior Brandon Fuller agreed.

"There are a number of advantages (to having all juniors take the ACT). It gets students thinking about college, particularly students who would not have thought of taking an ACT type test or going to college."

**-Ed Colby,
ACT spokesman**

"It doesn't seem to help in any way," Fuller said. "It just sees what teachers are teaching, not what we are learning."

The ACT is a better measure of what students learn in class, Fuller said. Plus it helps students get into college.

Students invest more time in preparing for the ACT, Fuller said. He read a preparation book that gave him helpful tips such as trying to average a question a minute. He said he thinks it helped boost his score and said other students could benefit from some sort of in-school training for the test.

However, others are not so sure.

Frankfort High School guidance counselor Joretta Crowe said she has mixed emotions about the proposal.

She likes ACT and its Educational Planning and Assessment System program, which helps students transition into high school and then to college. It includes student planning, instructional support, assessment and evaluation components.

"It gives us good longitudinal data that helps me help kids and parents figure out what they need to do to improve their scores," Crowe said.

However, Crowe worries that giving a timed standardized test will limit the flexibility schools have in administering the test.

"I know (Kentucky School Boards Association) is for it, but I am not so sure it is the best thing for all our kids," Crowe said. "Kids have high test anxiety and freeze during testing, particularly during timed tests. There are multiple special education issues that need to be addressed, such as providing them extended time and not overwhelming them with multiple portions of the test at once."

"I know it seems like I am speaking out of both sides of my mouth, but this is not necessarily for all kids, especially those whose focus is not going to college," Crowe said. "I don't think college is for everyone. A lot of kids go into apprenticeships, the military of something other than a four-year bachelor's degree. What are we going to do with those kids?"

Rep. Derrick Graham, D-Frankfort, agreed.

"Some kids are just more tech-

nical than others," Graham said.

He also does not understand why the state would only pay for students who will not use the test to go to college. He said the estimated \$1.5 million could be put to better use.

"That money could go into other areas of education and help with remediation or go towards accelerated programs," Graham said.

According to information discussed at Thursday's Senate Education Committee meeting, 54 percent of college students need remediation their first year, which costs parents and students \$11 million in tuition. Remedial classes do not count towards a student's degree.

Although legislators hope switching to the ACT will reduce the number of students in reme-

dial courses in Kentucky colleges, KSU testing director Carol Parks disagrees.

"They give them help now and students still need remediation," Parks said. "There is a lot of help already available for students. We offer help here – and I know the other institutions do, too.

"They can go online and link to the ACT Web site to get instruc-

See **TESTS**, A10

Tests

(Continued from Page A9)

tional materials," Parks said. "We give students a disk that has study guides if they come in and ask for it. This information has been out there for years. It is just getting kids to use it."

However, she said mandating the ACT as a good thing because it is an accurate measure of what students learn. Every year KSU gives incoming freshmen a math placement test. The scores almost always correspond with the students' math ACT score, Parks said.

She also suggested students take the test multiple times. She said students can start taking the test in fifth or sixth grade and can take it every 60 days if they want. They can take it as many times as they want and not ever send the scores anywhere.

Taking the test multiple times will help the students become familiar with the testing format and material so they can study for the next test, Parks said.

"Even if you get a good score, you can always do better," Parks said. "You may get a 25 and get into college, but you might want to take it again to try for a 30 so you can get a full ride or to see where (your knowledge level) is low."

Frankfort High School junior Jessica Bruning said she tried to prepare as much as possible. She got a good night's rest, woke up Saturday morning early, ate a good breakfast, packed up her calculator and pencil and headed to KSU.

"I am a little nervous because this is my first time," Bruning said. "I just want to see what it's like, and then I will probably come

back and take it again."

She felt comfortable going into the test because she studied an ACT preparation book and took a number of practice tests.

Franklin County High School senior Jamie Ballinger already is an ACT veteran. She came out to take the test a second time to help improve her score.

"I think I'll do better because last time I didn't have a calculator and it helps to have one," Ballinger said. "Math was my worst part last time. I didn't do very well, so I hope this helps."

However, Ballinger advised new ACT test takers to relax.

"Don't worry about it," Ballinger said. "It's not that hard."

Staff Writer Paul Glasser contributed to this report.